**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Chapter 2**

***GOD MAY BE KIND …***

***BUT HE'S NOT STUPID***

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he writer of this letter to 1st century Christians in Rome is Paul, God's first envoy to the Gentiles, known prior to his conversion as Saul. A legal scholar, on the Jewish high court, wreaking genocide on Christians, this overachiever is halted by heaven en route to rounding up more Jesus people up north in Syria.

On the road to Damascus he meets the risen Christ, and receives God's assignment to take the Gospel to non-Jewish nations. From AD 47-57 he starts churches along the Mediterranean, taking an earthshaking message he's ready to be tortured, jailed and martyred for.

***Checking America's Vitals***

Barna Research learned last month (Oct. 2002) that:

• Most adult Americans reject the idea of original sin, the existence of satan, and salvation received by God's grace alone;

• Americans tend to think that the core documents of the world's major faiths, like the Bible, Koran and Book of Mormon, are 'different expressions of the same spiritual truths;'

• Americans are nearly as likely to say that Jesus Christ sinned as to believe that He lived a sinless life.

Barna found that Americans believe "As long as you're spiritual, no problem!" 44% of self-proclaimed Christians believe *EVERY*body's going to heaven. Clearly, they haven't read Paul's mail!

***"Step Into The Time Machine"***

By the 1st century, when Jesus is on earth, the Jews are scattered, having lived seven centuries as captives of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and now under Rome's heel.

Along comes a rural rabbi named Jesus, teaching, doing miracles, drawing crowds, ticking off the establishment, then gets crucified -- as were 30,000 other Jewish men during this era!

Five weeks after His death more than 10,000 Jews are in Jesus' camp, willing to sack their lifelong convictions of (1) sacrificing animals to atone for sins; (2) obeying the Ten Commandments to win God's smile; (3) observing Saturday as the Sabbath; (4) believing in one God, not the Trinity; and (5) expecting Messiah to be a political king who'd evict the Roman invaders.

What would make 10,000 Jews suddenly risk body and soul, just days after the gruesome execution of this gentle Nazarene? Answer: they'd seen Jesus in person *after* He'd risen from the dead, compelling them to view life in a radical, new way!

***When in Rome ……***

The sprawling metropolis to which Paul writes is the world's urban capital, with 4-plus million residing along the Tiber. Exquisite temples and altars dot its seven hills to honor Apollo, Jupiter, Augustus, Saturn, the Divine Julius et al. 159 holidays are celebrated annually, including 93 government-funded public spectacles. Led by morally-empty suits who govern them, the Romans' thirst for satisfying their passions has no boundaries.

Paul's letter to believers there in A.D. 57 is timeless, having shaped the lives of many greats like St. Augustine and Martin Luther. Rome's Christians were a hetergeneous mix, mostly Gentiles, from aristocrats to freed slaves. Paul writes to fill the gaps in their knowledge of the faith. Primarily he addresses how man can be made right with God.

Many Jewish Christians label Paul a traitor to their religious traditions, while Gentile Christians flaunt their freedom from Mosaic law and regulations. Paul's goal is to enlighten both camps about their new unity in Christ whereby all have equal standing in God's family of faith. Being both a Jew and a Roman citizen, he has a unique perch for reconciling their differences. **Let's read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:11-19 (p. 1062).**

Paul's message is tough for Peter and other Christian leaders to swallow, mired in their religious customs. **Let's read Paul's letter to the Galatians, 2:14-16 (p. 1056).**

***Here Come da Judge***

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul divides mankind into three groups: (1) depraved pagans, (2) hypocritical moralizers (both Jew and Gentile) and (3) self-righteous Jews. Net net: all are equally guilty of not living up to their knowledge of God.

In John we saw that Jesus came to bring light to people living in darkness. As "the Light of the world," He shines on *all*. But in Romans 1 mankind has abandoned His Light and has been "turned over" by God to suffer the consequences.

All of us, even cannibals, have a sense of God, a "conscience." Whether we call Him God or not, our "moral software" believes there's a Creator, that there's right and wrong. Every person is made "in God's image," so we *know* we're trying to control our own lives instead of letting God. **Let's read Romans 2:1-29 (p. 1016).**

***Takes One to Know One***

***Romans 2:1-5***

We're born "gifted" at criticizing others. Comparing ourselves with them, we conclude that God will surely wave us in when death comes. In his letter to the Roman believers Paul demolishes that myth. God doesn't grade on a curve. We don't play for "closest-to-the-pin." God demands a hole-in-one (perfection) or nothing.

Fortunately God doesn't leave us hoisted hopelessly by our own petard. But that'll have to wait 'til chapter 3. Chapter 1 depicts the sickening reality of sinful man (Gentiles in particular) without God. Boasting about his rank as "God's chosen," Paul's Jewish reader then responds, "I'm glad I'm not like that!" Thus chapter 2 begins, "Hey, bud, you're not exempt! You're as lost as they are."

Some see God as waiting to pounce on sinners, but Paul contends that God's kindness is actually buying us more time to repent (2 Peter 3:9, 15) … but only *He* knows how *much* time.

***No Teacher's Pets!***

***Romans 2:6-11***

Paul's reference to good works has nothing to do with earning God's pardon (Romans 3:20). Paul says a real change in one's heart will produce a genuine change in one's conduct.

Eternal life is given, strings-free, to those who trust Christ. But those who reject Truth will suffer eternal separation from God (I John 5:11-12). At God's final judgment bar, the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15), the unbeliever's eternal lot will *not* be the issue (John 5:27, Acts 17:31, Hebrews 9:27). Because they've rejected God, unbelievers will have *already* decided their fate. The issue is how much punishment they'll suffer based on their rebellion.

When believers come before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Timothy 4:7-8), their destiny's already been sealed by their prior decision to follow Jesus. The Judgment (or "bema") Seat (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) is an *awards* ceremony where God honors what *He's* done *through* us, and graciously deletes all our self-serving attempts to act "spiritual."

When Paul says "first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles," he recalls God's pledge to Abraham: "Obey me, and you will be My people … (Jeremiah 11:4)." But the Jews turned their backs on God, and were captured by aggressive neighbors, instead of peacefully inhabiting the promised land God gave them, the land still in dispute today.

The writer destroys the Jews' contention that their limited obedience to the Law will gain them God's acceptance. Paul says only perfect obedience will do, and no one but Jesus Himself has ever lived, or will live, a sin-free life (James 2:10). By knocking the props out from beneath every single human who's ever lived, Paul sets up for chapter 3 where he reveals the "good news" that on the cross Christ paid our penalty for sin so that Jew and non-Jew alike may be declared "right with God" (John 1:10-14, Ephesians 2:8-10). Therefore, man can no longer (a) boast that he's earned God's favor or (b) insist that he's too sinful to receive His forgiveness.

Like a melting snowpack that eventually melts in the spring run-off, by delaying their decision to trust Christ as their Savior, Paul says non-believers are actually accruing a reservoir of reasons for God's ultimate wrath to be poured out on them.

***All Roads Lead to "J Day"***

***Romans 2:12-16***

By the "Law" Paul means rules God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai as the Israelites escaped Egypt through the Arabian desert. The Law set the Jews apart by entrusting them with God's directions for how to live with Him and with each other. But Jews will get no preferential treatment on Judgment Day. By definition, His grace to *all* gives us what we *don't* deserve. His mercy *doesn't*  give us what we *do* deserve. And His justice gives us what we deserve.

***Religion Fronting is Folly***

***Romans 2:17-24***

In Paul's time the most religious folks were the Jewish Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes. The Sadducees did not believe in the supernatural. That's why they were sad, you see.

"Jew" (from "Judah") means "praise to Jehovah." The Jews felt this name alone would get them to heaven. They exalted the Law (the Torah) which God had given them alone. And they relied on their good works -- like circumcision -- to be accepted by God.

Circumcision, the surgical ritual performed on eight day old Jewish lads, confirmed the male's Jewishness. It was to be an outward symbol of one's faith in Jehovah, not insurance from His wrath to come (Genesis 17:9-14). Still, rabbis would say, "Circumcision will deliver Israel from hell."

Because they failed to keep all the Law, Paul says circumcision is worthless. Rubbing it in, he adds, if an uncircumcised Gentile could somehow keep the Law (which he can't), *he'd* be acceptable to God.

In "Fiddler on the Roof" Tevye sings, "Who, day and night, must scramble for a living, feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers? The Papa, the Papa! Tradition." Golde and the mamas sing, "Who must raise the family and run the home, so Papa's free to read the holy books? The Mama, the Mama! Tradition!"

Paul says no religious tradition will make wrong right. Furthermore, hypocrisy encourages unbelievers to ridicule God (Isaiah 52:5).

***Circumcision Cuts Both Ways***

***Romans 2:25-29***

Paul maintains that the proof of a life sold out to God is not circumcision but obedience. He urges replacing physical circumcision with a circumcision of one's heart performed by God's Holy Spirit.

Circumcision of the heart and mind describes one's inward response to God. It's the cut of your heart, not of your manhood, that matters to God (2 Corinthians 3:6). An exterior label's only as accurate as the contents of its container. God's more concerned with contents than labels. Labels are powerless to give us right standing before Him.

Are you relying on anything but Christ for your eternity? Good deeds, traditions, family, church, checkbook? Jesus told Nicodemus, a high-ranking Jewish religious official, that he must be born again spiritually (John 3:1-21).

Here's the Gospel in a nutshell: God has made peace with us through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18)! Check it out! God closed the human uncrossable chasm that our sin had dug between Him and us, a bridging that was once and for all paid for on the cross. The one true God no longer holds your sins and mine against us because His Son Jesus "did the time" for our crime. God won't judge us based on what we've accomplished or on our good intentions. We'll be saved from endless torment in a place the Bible calls hell solely by placing our trust in Christ.

If you haven't already, could you sincerely whisper to God something like this? "God, I see that pleasing you is not a bootstrap operation. Try as I have, I can't earn Your love or forgiveness. I'm handcuffed to my sin, and I know now that Your Son Jesus purchased my acquittal by giving His life for me. Here and now I'm turning in all my efforts to win Your applause, and to gain heaven on my own terms. I give in to You, and I humbly accept Your free gift of a clean heart and clean conscience. Thank You, Father, for accepting me based not on my merits but on Christ's dying in my place. I'm all Yours. Now where do we go from here? In Jesus' name, amen."

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